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THE FORMAL ELEMENT IN POETRY.

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In a study of Hebrew poetry, undertaken long ago as a student task, I tried to make out what right that poetry had to its name. A good many authorities rested its claims on the poetical elevation of its ideas. Parallelism passed for a peculiarity of Hebrew poetic thought, and not as an artifice of the poetic form. And yet it would seem that what we think of as poetry is always artificial in form. Poetical ideas alone do not make a poem, for there are poems in plenty quite void of poetical ideas. But neither will every kind of artificiality pass for poetic form, because to spoil prose is not to make poetry of it. The expert Hebraists had given over in those days demonstrating a metre in the inspired lays, and no one, so far as I could find, was then pretending that Hebrew poetry had any structural element in common with the classic and modern tongues.

Now this seemed as good as admitting that, if what people now-a-days call poetry is poetry, then Hebrew poetry is not poetry at all, but some other pleasing trick in speech. It was a predicament that a Lowth or a Herder might consent to stay in, but of course no tyro could. The true idea of poetry must be come by; and it was. Ere long the discovery was announced in that seminary that the universal and constitutive element in poetry is *repetition*. The professor took the announcement calmly, and so did the students. I was neither ordered out of the room, nor made a doctor of anything on the spot. No, nor since that day have I been able to find out whether I was right or wrong. No one seems to know. I have applied to two or three erudite Semitists, who do their thinking in Hebrew and keep up English merely for family reasons; but they decline to give any opinion. They have forgotten about classic and other recent poetry, but agree that a fit disposal of my whimsey would be to submit it to the sniffs and sneers of the learned pundits who read these columns.

Now, to make my little notion quite intolerable, it needs only some reasons in its favor; and here they are:

1. A fairly good reason, as reasons go, for taking repetition to be the common factor in all poetry is that it is *found* in all poetry. In classic and modern examples it is repetition of sound; with the Hebrew it is repetition of sense. Now, repetition is far from being an universal and studied characteristic of prose. Ordinarily it would be offensive in prose. To become agreeable it must be constant and regular; but a rhythmic repetition of impressions on either the mind or the ear, when it occurs in prose, is felt to be an illicit and absurd simulation of poetry.

That repetition in the case of Hebrew parallelism is a *formal* element of poetic style needs, one would think, only to be stated. Any doubt that it is essentially an artifice of form, and not essentially a turn of thought, that, so to speak, the form is the substance of parallelism, ought to be plain enough to him who

considers the different kinds of parallelisms. In the synonymous variety, where the strictest repetition of thought may be found, the appearance normally of two members in each parallel is noticeably formal, and gives to the accustomed reader or listener much the same sense of rule and harmony that metre and rhyme produce. In antithetic parallelism the same impression is made, with the added mental charm of comparison; but the form of a repetition is retained. In free synthetic parallelisms the form is all that is retained. Here is no marked correspondence of ideas; but clause answers to clause, and the parade of repetition, like soldiers marching in platoons, is carefully kept up as a formal element common to all poetry.

2. Poetry has a distinctive aim; it must always be interesting. Of course it often falls short of its object; but to be interesting is not even an object with prose. To be "prosaic" is quite proper in prose. But repetition, artfully employed, is the charm common to all poetry, and to the kindred arts of music and dancing. Metre owes its agreeable effect to the constant recurrence of feet which are alike in quantity or accent. Variety but introduces more complex repetitions. The most artful Pindar or Swinburne must not postpone so long the line that answers to line as to prevent memory from notifying us of the repetition, or the poetic grace is lost. The regular pulse of a bass drum will draw after it all the boys in the street. The refrain of Sunday-school ditties will set them all shouting, though they have no breath to waste on the interloping stanzas. The Negro race has a notable ear for time or movement. Even in that super-refined musical style called "classic," the sonatas and symphonies of a Mozart or Beethoven remind one of the Hebrew parallelism by their constant recurrence to the "theme"; while the "learned school" of the Bachs and Handels are bent on producing an intellectual delight by repeating in many an ingenious fugueal form a musical idea dull in itself, but to the *connoisseur* intensely interesting when so treated. It would, of course, be pains thrown away to attempt expounding to the readers of such a periodical as this the witchery of repeated steps and figures that charm our giddy youth in the mazes of the modern dance. If perfectly understood, it would but add a needless example of the pleasure derived, in poetry or its sister arts, from incessant repetition according to rule.

3. The historic method of inquiry would reach the same results as the analytic. Poetry is the oldest extant literature, because it is the oldest literature. That is, poetry is the oldest composition that men took the trouble to preserve. Poetry was preserved because it presented in a form at once pleasing and easily remembered, as every school boy can testify, the legends, laws and precepts of ancient peoples. And it was repetition which gave to poetry both its mnemonic use and its artistic charm.

Poetry was associated in its inception not only with music, but also with the dance. Among an artless people the passion of an orator naturally seeks expression in wild gesture which by and by becomes a rude dance, and in a swinging intonation which formed the earliest chant. Now, when that barbaric cantillation and dance fall under some rule, then the language which they set off follows the same order, and becomes poetry. Order first appears when one clause of the speech, or phrase of the melody, or figure in the dance, corresponds in some way to that which has just preceded it. But this is to repeat the movement, the strain, or the thought which went before. The repetition may be purely formal,

not identical; but it must be set over against the thesis of idea, sound or gesture, as "answer" stands over against question in speech, or theme in music, or first swing of body or fling of leg in the dance. At all events, until repetition began, poetry had not begun. There might be frantic gesture or pompous song; but the language was prose, no matter how eloquent, so long as repetition, incessant and according to some law, did not set off what was said as different in form from common speech.

I have not based anything on the more or less successful attempts to find a rhythm in the Hebrew poetry. If it is there, then the poetic form is somewhat further developed than appears to the average reader of the Hebrew Bible; but repetition would still mark the kinship of that ancient poetry to those compositions which we dignify by that name, and repetition made the Hebrew parallels poetic even in the absence of rhythm.

I have argued myself into believing that I was right, after all, in those old student days; but this will make my present intrusion into an alien domain of learning all the more presumptuous, and the more sure of its grievous but fit punishment.

HOW FAR DOES THE CLAIM OF A DIVINE ORIGIN FOR THE BIBLE DEPEND UPON THE GENUINENESS OF ITS SEPARATE BOOKS ?

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There is so much confusion in the minds of some as to this question, that a few facts need to be deduced and emphasized. In the work of Conybeare and Howson, on the "Life and Epistles of St. Paul," in the chapter on the Epistle to the Hebrews, is the following: "There is no portion of the New Testament whose authorship is so much disputed; nor any of which the inspiration is more indisputable." This statement concerns a single book, and has the following qualifications: (1) It was written in apostolic times, and under apostolic sanction. As proof of this are the facts that it was certainly written before the destruction of Jerusalem (A. D. 70) as evidenced by the many allusions to the temple and temple-services as still existing (e. g. ch. 13:11-13); that the author was acquainted with Timothy (13:23), and was over an apostolic church (13:19); and that it was accepted from the earliest times by the church as apostolic (see Conybeare and Howson, *ibid.*). (2) It is in harmony, in its teaching, with other books whose genuineness is undoubted, i. e. it is in harmony with the analogy of faith. (This pertains to it as didactic and not historic.) (3) It does not claim to have been written by any known author, i. e. its author is not given in its contents. With these qualifications the genuineness of the book does not affect its inspiration. If there are other books with these qualifications, or similar ones, they stand upon the same basis. Thus, in this category are to be placed, for example, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and some of the Psalms. That is, the genuineness of these books does not affect the question of their inspiration because of